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SUBVERSION AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION: A STUDY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF TWO ENSLAVED WOMEN

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Abstract

Resistance originates from inequalities in society. Institutionalized power embedded in a state and the implementation of that power prevents a group or a class of people from exercising their rights. Hence, the need arises for the subordinate group to escape from subordinate positions in hierarchical systems of oppression. In this context a study of African American slave narratives, especially those written or narrated by enslaved women provide a unique opportunity to examine extreme disadvantage and inequality. The paper intends to study the narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley as instances of slave women's voices which have engaged the dominating system of oppression, through overt and covert forms of resistance, and thereby empowering themselves. These testimonies are evidence of multiple forms of resistance that are manifested in everyday interaction between the enslaved and their superiors. Whether their acts are able to bring about any meaningful change in their lives immediately is of lesser importance than the challenge they throw at a system which is instrumental in keeping them in their subordinate positions.

Keywords: *Resistance, subordinate, oppression, slave narratives, inequality, empowering*

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Acts of resistance arise from unequal power relations in society. In a hegemonic order, race and gender identify those who have power and those who do not. Under such an order the dominant class enjoys all power and exercises that power to control and keep a group of people in a subordinate state. However, it is also possible to understand power from the standpoint of the oppressed i.e. by examining the ways how a subordinate group wields power under extreme adverse situation to challenge a system responsible for their inferior status. For decades Black feminist literary criticism, like black feminist political theory, have analyzed how different systems of oppressions interlock and function to disenfranchise black women, while proposing solutions to eradicate oppression for everyone. Deborah King in her article '*Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness*' explains the multiple forms of oppression, i.e. racial, class, gender and sexuality, and concludes that when these forms of disenfranchisement combine, the result is exponential disempowerment. As an historical example she cites the sexual exploitation of black women in slavery (47). Race, gender and social class are the three distinctive systems of oppression, forming one overarching structure of domination. Therefore race, class and gender represent the three systems of oppression that most heavily affect the lives of African American women. These three categories can be used to identify the ongoing struggles of subordinate groups to resist negative and controlling images of their group - to resist internalizing the limits to self-esteem, self-valuation, and collective identity imposed by the dominant group. (Collins 222-227). However, subordinate groups actively resist oppression and devaluation in numerous ways every day. Self-respect and self-esteem result from a strong connection to and identity with a group of people who share a common history and life experiences. African American people have resisted internalizing the oppression and have exhibited the potential for self-definition and self-valuation, a process critical to the survival of oppressed groups. Recognition of the history of resistance of the subordinate group helps to counter the cultural myths and beliefs of the dominant culture.

The availability of rich testimony from the subordinate groups within the institution of slavery in the United States helps to understand the magnitude and effects of the black people's defiant rejection of slavery. In this context a study on resistance within African American slave narratives, especially in those written or narrated by enslaved women, as a response to subordination under conditions of severe inequality is meaningful. Black women occupied the lowest rung of a hierarchal social order. Therefore, the discussions of autobiographies written by enslaved women will reveal how these women have created an identity of their own through relentless struggle in hegemonic society. These narratives are testimonies of powerful women who individually as well as collectively were able to mobilize resistance against oppression. These narratives describe everyday acts that appear to violate the strict codes that governed their lives and explicit confrontation with the slave-owners. The narrators also describe non-resistant acts ranging from quiescence to subtle expressions of human agency.

In this paper I intend to discuss two nineteenth century African American women autobiographies as examples of black women using their personal narratives to wage a war against a dominant system of oppression: Harriet Jacobs' *'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl'*, an antebellum narrative written in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, and Elizabeth Keckley's *'Behind the Scenes'*, a post-emancipatory narrative written in 1868. For Jacobs and Keckley the very act of writing an autobiography and getting it published at a time when pro-slavery apologists were persistently challenging the authority of the slave narratives, was itself empowering. These authors were able to inscribe their experiences into the historical narratives and thereby resist their marginalization. Both Jacobs and Keckley were aware of the fact that most whites and other non-black readers would be sceptical of their accounts of slavery; therefore their narratives were imbued with polite and earnest urges directed to the readers to believe their experiences of slavery and emancipation. The very first line of *'Incidents'* says, 'Reader, be assured the narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true.' (Jacobs 5) In the same page she clearly spells out her agenda of writing her history:

> 'I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse.'

In *'Behind the Scenes'* Keckley observes that, 'her life has been an eventful one', that 'everything (she has) written is strictly true; much has been omitted, but nothing has been exaggerated.' (Keckley 3). Both the authors have argued effectively that the most creditable accounts of slavery are produced by those who have witnessed slavery firsthand.

Recent scholarship has unburied multiple forms of resistance to oppression which are both overt as well as covert. It ranges from such explicit transgressive acts like insurrection, running away, killing or wounding slave masters and overseers, poisoning, concealment, truancy, to less overt form of resistance like feigning illness to gain a respite from work, practicing birth control and abortion, guile, secrecy, back-talk, speech acts of retort, talking back to challenge authority figures. Within the slave narratives of Jacobs and Keckley, the formerly enslaved often mention transgressive acts many of which elicited harsh punishment. For example, in *'Incidents'* Linda witnesses both the vicious beating of an enslaved black husband, who had previously argued in the presence of the overseer with his wife concerning the paternity of her unusually fair-skinned baby. When it was revealed that the baby was fathered by their master, the slave couple was sold off. Linda recounts,

> 'When the mother was delivered into the trader's hands, she said (to her master), "You promised to treat me well." To which he replied, "You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!" She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child.' (Jacobs 15-16)

White patriarchy has always tried to control and violate black women's body for its own sexual and economic desires. The most vigorous condemnation of slavery and its vices is Jacobs *'Incidents'* with its emphasis on the sexual violation of black women by white masters. At the age of fifteen Linda first realizes the dangers looming in a slave woman's life in antebellum America. She is confronted by the base motives of her master Dr. Flint who asks for sexual favours, threatening her with dire consequences if she does not submit to his wishes. In the chapter titled 'The Trials of girlhood', Linda describes her ordeals, the agony she undergoes, unable to disclose in others, not even to her free grandmother about the doctor's sexual and psychological abuse. In order to shun Dr. Flint's advances she uses the strategy of avoidance- by keeping close to her family and friends. In *'Incidents'* Jacobs shows how talking back can be a threat to those who maintain their dominant place in society by silencing 'others'. When Linda's

love for a free-born black carpenter is thwarted because the institution of slavery does not allow any kind of legal bond between enslaved men and women, she is confronted by Dr. Flint who suggests her to choose a husband from one of his slaves. Linda retorts by saying: 'Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?' (35). She is struck by Dr. Flint for answering back. He warns her that if he catches her young man 'lurking' about the neighbourhood he would 'shoot him as soon as (he) would a dog' (36).

Linda realizes that white supremacy as well as the economic value placed on her body would not allow her to form bonds of love according to her preference. However, Linda is not powerless; she does not succumb to the immoral proposals of Dr. Flint, but rather asserts her authority in selecting a young, successful, unmarried white man as her lover, because she reasons,

> 'It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment' (47).

This deliberate and strategic act of choosing Mr. Sands as her lover presents Linda as a heroic actor who is powerful enough to transgress the conventional sexual morality codes. Rather than surrendering to the demands of Dr. Flint, to become his sexual partner, she chooses an alternative with the hope that Mr. Sands might one day free her and her future children. She also does not shirk to take the full responsibility of her actions, 'I know what I did and I did it with deliberate calculation' (46). She asserts, 'I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favoured another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in the small way' (47). At midlife, reflecting on her moral concessions, she writes: 'I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others' (48) Linda thus offers a new definition of morality and womanhood based on her own experience as a black female slave. In the words of Angelyn Mitchell,

> 'Understanding herself in relation to her world and the limitations of that world, Jacobs repeatedly asserts her human rights.....in two ways: by

> reappropriating her sexuality as a weapon of resistance and by repossessing her body from (Dr Flint's) control' (36).

The experience of motherhood makes Linda understand her peculiar situation in a better light. After her daughter is born, she concludes that 'Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering, and mortifications peculiarly their own' (Jacobs 64). Her children now legally belong to Dr. Flint and she gets ready to pay any prize for their freedom. In order to frustrate Dr Flint's new plans to abuse her, and to see her children in safe hands, Linda conceals herself in her grandmother's tiny garret for seven years until she can escape to freedom. In hiding, Linda is able is thwart Dr. Flints mission of gaining information about her and thereby capturing her. In order to detract the doctor off her trail, Linda makes use of guile. She writes letters to her tormentor and contrives to have them mailed from the North by a friend. Disguise also serves as an effective misdirection technique in *'Incidents'* whereby Linda uses some type of disguise in six specific incidents to deceive the eyes of those who might recognize her. After escaping from the plantation run by Dr. Flint's son, Linda has to move from one hiding place to another in disguise before she is finally garaged for seven years in her grandmother's loft. Jacobs writes,

> 'Betty brought me a suit of sailor's clothes,—jacket, trowsers, and tarpaulin hat. . . . 'Put your hands in your pockets, and walk ricketty, like de sailors.' . . . I passed several people whom I knew, but they did not recognize me in my disguise.' (90).

Even after arriving in the North, Linda knows that, as a runaway slave, it will be necessary for her to periodically assume disguises to avoid detection. In Philadelphia, she locates a shop 'and bought some double veils and gloves' (125-126). Again, apart from Linda's need for concealment, in *'Incidents'*, Jacobs recounts several instances where hiding becomes an important tool for the enslaved blacks. For instance, she tells the story of a free black man married to a slave woman hiding his children in the woods in an effort to prevent the mistress's new husband from claiming them as his own slaves (44). Later in her narrative, Jacobs writes that because marauding groups of poor whites are seizing the opportunity to terrorize black women at will during the Nat Turner uprising, 'many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their way' (54). Jacobs's final reference to a disguise ironically

celebrates the fact that one is no longer needed, as Linda's freedom has been purchased by Mrs. Bruce:

> 'I had objected to having my freedom bought, yet I must confess that when it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders. When I rode home in the cars I was no longer afraid to unveil my face and look at people as they passed' (155).

Elizabeth Keckley's post- war autobiography also shows evidence of explicit and subtle resistance against the cruel custom of slavery, sexual violation and inhuman labour. As a post-bellum piece of work, it also testifies to the country's reconciliation process and socio-political equality. She vents out her repressed anger by boldly declaring in her 'Preface' of her narrative that;

> 'a wrong was inflicted upon me; a cruel custom deprived me of my liberty, and since I was robbed of my dearest right, I would not have been human had I not rebelled against the robbery' (4).

'*Behind the Scenes*' therefore documents the many rebellions Keckley enact against a system which attempts to dehumanise her, and rob her of her human rights. At the age of eighteen Keckley becomes aware of her sexual status as a black female when her mistress Mrs Burwell engages the village schoolmaster to whip her because she finds her too proud. Keckley describes the whipping as one of 'excruciating agony' (21), but she neither moans nor wails. She states that '(she) was too proud to let (her) tormentor know what (she) was suffering' (21). Her protests lead to more beatings from her master afterwards. However, she possesses an indomitable will and her virtue rests not in submission to injustices. Instead she courageously resists the violence on her body, fights back all efforts to dominate her physically and psychologically until the schoolmaster 'burst into tears, and declare(s) that it would be a sin to beat (her) any more' (22). Keckley suffers not only the teacher's as well as her master's repressed sexual desire in the form of flogging, but also endures direct sexual violence for four years from her master's neighbour. In her narrative Keckley chooses to cover her sexual persecution in a single paragraph. In her own words:

> 'I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he (the white man) persecuted me for four years and I-I-became a mother' (24).

Like Harriet Jacobs she does not consider the incident as a weakness of character but blames 'the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in (her) then position' (24). Keckley clearly refuses to see herself as a victim of rape and seduction.

Keckley also presents a number of incidents involving subtle resistance; like she reprints letters from her father to mother after he had been sold away from his family. Keckley's inclusion of these and other letters also functions as a subtle critique to the system's compulsory illiteracy of slaves that ensued from southern laws against black education. Silence is also an important technique in '*Behind the Scenes'*. When Keckley's mother is told by her mistress to stop crying about losing her husband, who has been taken out of state, and to pick out another mate,

> 'To (her mistress') unfeeling words (her) mother made no reply. She turned away in stoical silence, with a curl of that loathing scorn upon her lips which swelled in her heart.' (13).

At the age of thirty one Keckley buys her and her son's freedom from her master Mr. Garland. Unlike Harriet Jacobs who believes that she is free under God's law and refuses to pay a single cent for her freedom, Keckley insists on buying her freedom legally and feels insulted when her owner offers her a quarter for the ferry ticket that can take her across the river into Illinois where slavery is illegal. She indignantly replies, 'By the laws of the land I am your slave-you are my master, and I will be free by such means as the laws of the country provide' (Keckley 31). These are the words of a self-respecting dignified woman who is determined to assert her independence and use her honest labour to buy her freedom.

From the narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley it is obvious that resistance is an organic ingredient in a slave woman's life. However it must be mentioned that no small act of resistance is possible without the unconditional support and constant vigilance from a community which provided the energy to survive under severe conditions. For both Jacobs and

Keckley the black community provided the spaces from where they were able to wage their war against oppression. As Angela Davis observes,

> 'The consciousness of (black's) oppression, the conscious thrust towards (slavery's) abolition could not have been sustained without impetus from the community (blacks) pulled together through the sheer force of their strength.' (86)

Feminist scholarship in general and African American feminist scholarship in particular would remain incomplete if the narratives of the enslaved women remain unexplored. The writings of Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley and other enslaved authors not discussed here are groundbreaking as they theorize black female subjectivity. Jacobs' and Keckley' narratives foreground the ways in which their gender compounds the experience of racial disenfranchisement under white capitalist patriarchal system of oppression. The narratives also leave a message that change does not come from those who oppress. Instead the transformation begins with the oppressed.

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